



Into the Light

September-October 2006

Matthew 19.26

Abandoned?

By Bob Van Domelen

⁵ *Let your life be free from love of money but be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never forsake you or abandon you."*⁶ *Thus we may say with confidence: "The Lord is my helper, (and) I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" (Hebrews 13.5-6)*

"When I was arrested, I lost my family, my job, my friends, and any hope of ever feeling loved again. My pastor said he would come for a visit, but I haven't seen him at all in the past four years. I write letters and hope for a letter back, but they don't come. My cellie tells me that's just the way it's going to be for a sex offender so I had better get used to it. Even God seems out of reach. What's the point of living without hope, and right now I don't have any."

The words are not unique. In fact, few weeks pass without my getting letters that mention one or more and sometimes all of those things. I write back that God IS with them and that it is His desire that they feel His loving and healing presence. But I know that some will read my words and set the letter down feeling no better than they did before.

God is much more than pretty or energetic church music, more than impressive sermons, and more than buildings large or small, old or new, buildings designed as places of worship. God's word is more than a list of do's and don'ts. It's a living, breathing relationship between God and His people.

And before I go any further, let me remind you that you and I are among God's people. ²⁸*"For in him we live and move and have our being."* (Acts 17.28) Our sins don't separate us from God. They make us understand how helpless we are on our own and how much we need God's grace and mercy.

The other evening, I was watching a program on TV about restorative justice. A man who had killed another man when he was 16 years old was meeting the sister of his victim. It was 21 years later. The boy was now a man.

When asked by the show's host whether he was looking for forgiveness for what he had done in order to impress the parole board, he shared that it seemed more important to him for the victim's sister to have a chance to say things that she needed to say.

In the world of most TV drama, a happy ending is the goal. In this program, the meeting didn't seem to resolve anything. The woman heard the man, heard the words of sorrow from him over what he had done. But she did not believe he was sincere and in the end, left the prison more unsettled and more convinced that he was still the same monster in all respects who had killed her brother.

I am not trying to depress anyone with this example. I am, however, trying to point out that the man returned to his cell knowing he had done what he felt needed doing. Her forgiveness did not come but that was not his to control. This man seemed to know that each day of the remainder of his life would only be a success if it matched with his spiritual belief system.

Is this important? Sure it is. If my happiness depended upon being able to satisfy everyone that I could be fully trusted, I would most certainly die a very unhappy man. Some people will never trust me and that is neither good nor bad. It just is.

There are consequences to actions that once set in motion cannot be altered. It is important to understand that consequences can be very negative and not all of them have good or favorable endings—despite our best efforts to move in positive directions. But sometimes consequences are like being in a boat carried out to sea by a strong tide without the benefit of oars or an engine to alter that direction. The sense of being all alone can be incredible.

I will never forsake you or abandon you

In God's eyes this is not a statement based on our behavioral track record each and every day. It is a statement of truth and more importantly, it is a statement of love. God is not like the people, even good people, we know. God stays by our side regardless.

I have, however, written a number of times before that if we seek God with all our hearts, He *will* show us where we need to grow and what things need to change. Christian people call this a spirit of conviction and that sounds a little like being in front of a judge in court, doesn't it.

For the sex offender, that means taking a hard look at the reason for that sense of conviction. It means learning to see things from a victim's point of view (empathy) and learning what steps to take to avoid future offenses (relapse prevention). It also means coming to grips with our own childhood situations, forgiving and asking forgiveness.

It is my personal belief that significant change can not be achieved without attention to both victim(s) and self. Victim empathy will force us to see our behavior as our victim saw it; autobiographies will shed some light on contributing factors behind our actions.

Treatment programs might not spend much time on an abuser's broken childhood, but that doesn't mean it ought to be ignored. Remember, God was there. He saw it all. I wish God would have stepped in and stopped all this darkness as it was occurring, but God doesn't force anyone to choose the right thing. He does grieve, though, for our victims and for us. To see the moments of abuse in our

memories knowing we cannot go back and change them, demands that we accept that bad things happened that should not have happened.

The other day I was thinking about the road to God, and the image I had was of a beautiful pavement stretched out before me. When I turned around, however, I could see the potholes, the damaged pavement, and the amazingly poor condition of the road I had just been on.

I can spend the balance of my life looking at the disaster some would call my past life or I can turn and face God with the belief that my journey will probably result in more road damage but hopefully not the same kind of damage I caused in my past. The difference is simple: the road journeyed for many sex offenders is a journey littered with pain and despair, but the road ahead ends at an incredible destination—an eternity with God.

I will not be afraid

What can anyone do to me?

If I could change Scripture (which I wouldn't do), I would say, "I will not be afraid *without calling on the Lord*." I don't know of anyone in history who was not afraid at some point. Jesus certainly was afraid in the Garden of Gethsemane, but He called on His Father and said, "Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done (Matthew 26.42)." After Jesus had expressed his fear, he rose and went to face those who were coming for him.

The man on the TV documentary might not ever get out of prison. There are sex offenders who write to say that they are not sure they even *want* to be released. They ask, "Where will I live? How will I find a job? What church would ever welcome me?" And from what I've read in the paper and seen on TV, I am in no position to paint a pretty picture for them.

At the same time, it all comes back to the main theme of this article. If my happiness and security depends upon a world willing to support and encourage offenders in the same manner they do victims, then happiness will most likely be out of reach.

If, on the other hand, we are willing to redefine the source of our happiness to one of relationship with God, then we *can* experience joy, peace, *and* happiness wherever we are. To some of you, however, that is a poor second to being loved and welcomed by people.

What I have learned in the past 21 years is that I will always disappoint people just as they will always disappoint me—at least in some way or another. Being rejected by people is a reality for the sex offender. Being rejected by God is an impossibility. I have also learned that when I learn to lean on Jesus, I do a much better job of living with my neighbor.

Think about it. Pray about it. You are never alone—not really. Jesus did say, "*I will never forsake you or abandon you.*" Trust in that! □

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All things are possible with God! *Our Prayer Corner*



Prayer is an incredible gift we can give one another, for there is no better thing than to lift our lives, hopes, and dreams to the altar of the Lord.

Let us pray . . .

- First and always foremost, for our victims, that each day for them is a new day, a day without fear, and a day of healing.
- Secondly, for those who minister to victims, that their witness of love and support helps to bring healing for those so desperately needing it.
- For those preparing to be released from prison, that they are able to maintain hope and direction in spite of the current passing of legislation related to a national registry.
- For those who feel abandoned, that they will know beyond a doubt that God IS with them through everything.
- For organizations with after-care programs (PF, SATA-SORT, etc), that they be blessed with success and support.
- For support ministries dealing with sex offenders, that they find encouragement to continue their efforts.
- For Bob, that he continues to listen for the voice of the Lord in all things; that his life be filled with healthy balance and accountability; and that he has the time needed to do everything.
- (As always) For those who are still abusing, that they will come to understand the devastation they bring on their victims and that they seek help for themselves—whatever the cost.

There is Good

"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" That's the question Nathaniel asked of Phillip when told that Phillip had found *the one Moses wrote about*. (John 1.46)

A recent letter from a friend mentioned that there is so much that is negative about being in prison, he believed that the good things others did for inmates were ignored or forgotten. I modified his thoughts a bit in my return letter to point out the good things staff members did and suggested I was not alone in these kinds of experiences.

It's been a while since I last asked your input, but I really think it would be great if you would share an example of how a prison staff member touched your life in a good way.

This newsletter is small by some standards, so please keep your stories to no more than a paragraph. If you need an example of size, look at the material found in the *Bits & Pieces* column from earlier editions. Deadline: October 1.
Note: I can't use names or locations. Mail your example to

**Broken Yoke Ministries
PO Box 361
Waukesha, WI 53187-0361**

The Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act Of 2006

Since 1994, states across the nation have been developing and using a sex offender registry system that depends on regular compliance by sex offenders in those states to update basic information on a regular basis. Some states have internet web pages where the general public can find out whether or not a sex offender lives in their neighborhoods, while other states provide that information to individuals contacting their offices.

The Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006 is a very large document, but the essential points of the legislation can be seen here.

1. **Expanding the National Sex Offender Registry.** The bill will integrate the information in State sex offender registry systems and ensure that law enforcement has access to the same information across the United States, helping prevent sex offenders from evading detection by moving from State to State. Data drawn from this comprehensive registry will be made available to the public so parents have the information they need to help protect their children from sex offenders.
2. **Strengthening Federal Penalties for Crimes against Children.** The bill imposes tough mandatory minimum penalties for the most serious crimes against children and increases penalties for crimes such as sex trafficking of children and child prostitution. It also provides grants to States to help them institutionalize sex offenders who have shown they cannot change their behavior and are about to be released from prison.
3. **Making It Harder for Sex Predators to Reach Our Children on the Internet.** The bill authorizes new regional Internet Crimes Against Children Taskforces that will provide funding and training to help State and local law enforcement combat crimes involving the sexual exploitation of minors on the Internet.
4. **Creating A New National Child Abuse Registry And Requiring Investigators To Do Background Checks Of Adoptive And Foster Parents Before They Are Approved To Take Custody Of A Child.** By giving child protective service professionals in all 50 States access to this critical information, we will improve their ability to investigate child abuse cases and help ensure that vulnerable children are not put into situations of abuse or neglect.

(Source: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/07/20060727-7.html>)

When information on the Child Safety Act of 2005 sponsored by Senator Jim Sensenbrenner became known, I sent an email to the Senator requesting that as his committee deliberated over this legislation that they also try to keep in mind the rehabilitation and restoration process that was indeed possible for many sex offenders.

My note might have gotten lost in what I would guess was a large volume of support letters for his legislation, but I was disappointed in not even getting an acknowledgment of receipt. Then paranoia set in and I wondered why I bothered to write because I was, after all, one of those his committee was writing the bill to control.

The Adam Walsh bill moved rapidly through the process of being read and approved despite attempts by some outside of congress to at least have some debate over this far-reaching document. Call me a pessimist or perhaps a realist, I did not see much hope of that happening because who, after all, would ever see anything wrong with a bill designed to protect children? Certainly not yours truly.

As I looked at the four points listed above and knowing that there are components of each that would not be obvious without a more detailed reading of the whole bill, I couldn't actually disagree with the basics.

It is important, however, to understand that individual states have enacted legislation that is far more repressive than the Adam Walsh Act. These include restricting offenders from living or working within 1000 feet of schools, parks, child care centers, etc. Georgia included a restriction zone that included bus stops where children might board buses. As of this writing, a temporary restraining order was in effect. Should the law be declared constitutional, hundreds of offenders would be forced to move.

Wisconsin recently announced that a number of offenders who failed to register with the state had been

apprehended. What will happen to them is still uncertain, but most states will become more aggressive about their registry listings.

I could argue that no other individual leaving prison is subject to such scrutiny—certainly no other offense seems to warrant a lifetime registration. I could (as some strongly suggest) say that all of these restrictions are unfair and designed to make sure an offender wears the label molester until death, yet opponents will argue that victims wear the effects of their victimization for an equal amount of time. The issue is not, I think, whether the bills are fair. The issue is that the bills exist and all offenders will have to deal with them.

The public might take a measure of comfort with the idea that their public leaders are doing everything in their power to protect children, but it is the unknown offenders yet to be brought into the light that will not be affected by this or any other child protection act.

An offender on the registry is not prevented from abusing another child simply because of the registry or because of *any* laws enacted for that purpose. An offender on the registry who is encouraged in his or her daily walk, however, will know how to make the right choices. Such an individual will not reoffend, and having made the right choices for the past 21 years, I would be the first to attest to that truth.

I personally believe in positive approaches. I believe as strongly as I can state this that my identity is as a man who committed terrible crimes but also as one who refuses to live in the identity of those deeds. I cannot control what the state wants to call me in order to fit into their legislative profile, but I can and do wear the identity that God has given me—a man who does everything in his power to be the man he was created to be.